

A Brief History of Photography – Meg Kay

Did you know that artists have used cameras for hundreds of years! It has been a tool in the artist's toolbox for literally centuries. The word photography is from the Greek words “to draw” (graph) and “light” (photo), therefore photography means *drawing with light*.

The word camera means “room” in Latin. And early cameras were in fact rooms, or tents and were called camera obscuras (dark rooms). These early cameras were actual dark rooms or tents, with a small hole cut into one side. An image would be projected onto a canvas or wall on the opposite side of the room, upside down. By the way, this is the way your eye works...but luckily our brains invert the image for us! Over the centuries, this camera became smaller (it could fit on a tabletop) and lens were added so the image was clearer and right side up. Artists would then trace the image on their canvas or paper or wall. *Note that tracing has been a common practice for artists for centuries!*

Artists who used the camera obscura include da Vinci, Raphael, Vermeer, and more recently David Hockney.

The ability to permanently capture an image, however, was elusive. In 1826, a Frenchman named Niepce captured an image on paper. However, it took almost 3 hours exposure! It wasn't until 1839 that “photography” was invented in Europe. William Henry Fox Talbot, a scientist from England, is considered the inventor of the first photograph, what he called a calotype, on paper. Silver nitrate was the “magic” ingredient allowing the image to be permanent. Jacques Louis Daguerre, an associate of Niepce, also deserves credit. He was working at the same time in France, and he too captured an image on a metal plate. He later developed a commercial process to develop photographs on metal plates called Daguerreotypes. A camera started as a light tight room, then became a box like device. With the ability to capture an image permanently on film, metal plates, and paper, photography was invented. We now capture images digitally—a whole other story—but the premise is the same: photography is just another tool in an artist's toolbox.



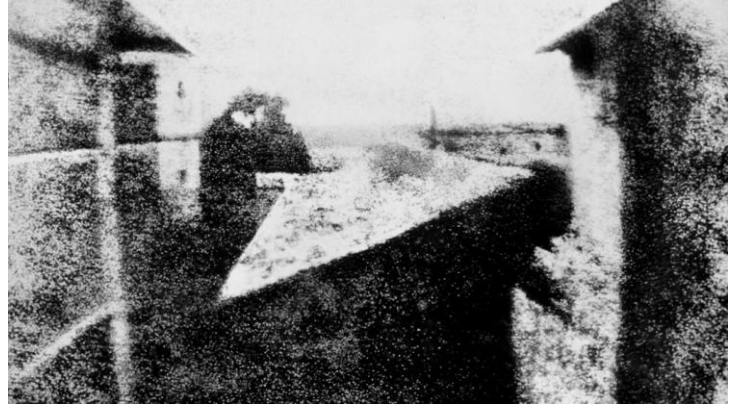
Illustration of Leonardo da Vinci's camera obscura device



Camera Obscura device, c. 1800



National Geographic Camera Obscura
Exhibit from 2013, view of Central Park



Widely considered one of the first
photographs, William Henry Fox Talbot, 1839